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Response Paper, The House of Mirth: Book One

Repeatedly throughout the House of Mirth, we as the reader witness a consistent incapacity for emotion experienced through the novel’s protagonist, Lilly Bart. “Miss Bart”, as she is so often referred to, (likely in order to emphasize her current marriage status) lives a life steeped in superficiality and superfluous relationships which yield next to no emotional benefit any parties involved, other than Lilly’s own feelings of acceptance due to the surrounding character’s constant adoration for her physical beauty, as evidenced by seemingly every male character present at her unveiling of her simple gown in the show. However, as the novel proceeds and as Lilly continually manages to spend more than her allotted fortune (or “allowance” as her Aunt puts it), complexities arise that force Lilly to reassess the very ideas and ambitions that have been entrenched within her (meaning her innate obsession to ironically “not care for money”) since childhood, likely due to the materialistic environment which has surrounded/surrounds her as well as the ultimate failure on her parents part to instill any proper sense of morality within her, demonstrated regularly by her mother, most notably in Mrs. Bart’s intentional negligence of Lilly’s father following his financial decline. As her financial stresses build to the point of social embarrassment, a fate seemingly worse than death, Lilly is finally confronted. This confrontation embodies itself in the verbally abusive (although completely viable) tirade on the part of Gus Trenor, and is the first true sign of dynamic development on the part of Lilly.

As Gus expresses true passion, devoid of the unnecessary articulations which characterize most of Wharton’s female dialogue, Lilly is reduced to a state of shock. When Gus directly communicates thoughts as they materialize in his mind, thoughts that lack respect for Lilly’s vanity, this forces the ever-so-witty Lilly into a corner. Confronted with unrestrained emotion absent of verbal formalities, Lilly becomes immersed in the truth of herself, the truth that she continually uses, abuses, and disregards other’s feelings. In a world shrouded in a cloud of false pleasantries, Lilly was formerly able to exclude herself from any even remotely confrontational, or even worse, reflective conversation. Locked in a room with an animalistic Gus “squaring his shoulders aggressively” in her direction, Lilly legitimately fears for her well-being (Wharton 129). However, that is not to say her physical well-being, for it is specifically remarked upon that “The words-the words were worse than the touch!” (Wharton 130). While Gus’s touch may have been “a drowning consciousness”, his words still proved vastly more penetrating (Wharton 129). The reason for the significance behind said penetration it because provided a light where it was unwanted; that is, Gus’s verbal assault was to Lilly what Plato’s sun was to the prisoners of the cave.

Just as the sun brought pain to Plato’s ignorant prisoners, so did Gus’s tirade bring emotional despair to Lilly. The subsequent events following Lilly’s departure from the Tenor’s home proves such. So overwhelming is her realization of self that Lilly is unable to face her bed alone for she knows what lies before her when reality resumes, excruciating loneliness. This tiger-pit of abyss Lilly was tricked into via Mr. Tenor (considering his intentional failure to relay Mrs. Tenor’s absence) is tangible evidence of dynamism within Miss. Bart’s character. This change is more akin to “Lilly” rather than “Miss. Bart” in that it gives her dimension, depth, and an emotional identity beyond what has been her eternal quest to “marry up”. Although her misplacement of ambition was certainly mentioned prior by Selden, Lilly failed to absorb it. The conversation had merely remained an unpleasant reminder of Selden’s ability to rationally and accurately assess people in a society characterized by a perpetual masquerade whereas Mr. Tenor’s drunken frankness forced recognizance on Lilly’s part and ultimately refused to be shooed away like the fly that was Selden’s former observation. Although perceived as a sexually frustrated and drunken as well as aggressive antagonist, Mr. Tenor’s relationship with “Miss Bart” is far and away the most beneficial friendship (or rather formerly referred to as such) with Lilly.